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Four- and five-year-old children attend daily sessions at each of four Early Admissions Centers. These children live in depressed low-economic areas. Their vocabularies are very limited, and their restricted lives have not permitted them to develop the necessary store of basic concepts or the social maturity needed for school. A center becomes a world of surprises for such a child as he is encouraged to talk, run, and sing. Teachers help children improve enunciation and vocabulary through stories and games. Lunchtime introduces the children to many new foods and to basic table manners. Class projects include growing plants and caring for a class pet. Because school buses are available, the centers are able to schedule numerous excursions. A senior teacher, an assistant teacher, a teaching aide, and volunteer helpers, one for each day of the week, compose a center's adult component.

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NEA Journal

To Be Continued . . .

The story of the Baltimore Early School Admissions Project

THIRTY-FIVE small forms crouch on the shiny vinyl tile floor. The teacher's voice is low, but her words are clear. "All right. You're all asleep. Now say it with me, softly." And softly, the children begin:

In the heart of a seed, buried deep, so deep,
A dear little plant lay fast asleep.

The voices grow louder:

"Wake!" said the sunshine, "and creep to the light,"
"Wake!" said the voice of the raindrops bright.

The children stir and come to their feet as the teacher continues alone:

The little plant heard, and it rose to see
What the wonderful outside world might be.

The children are four-year-olds, participants in Baltimore's Early School Admissions Project—an experiment which seeks to help children who live in the city's depressed areas. The dramatized poem, which was part of a nature-study lesson, might be considered an allegorical description of what is happening to them because of the Project.

FOR years Baltimore school officials have known that children who live in depressed areas of the city do not make the same scholastic progress as do their contemporaries who live in more prosperous sections and have offered special opportunities for enriching experiences and remedial work to the children in the poorer areas. For many children, however, the sorry sequence has persisted—they drop behind in scholastic achievement a little more year after year, frustration mounts, and with it, a growing reluctance to participate in the school program.

Faced with this situation, school administrators asked themselves what would happen if children from culturally deprived, poverty-ridden homes came under school influences a year earlier than is customary. They wondered whether the enrichment gained by a prekindergarten year—by starting to school at four instead of the conventional five—would increase the chances of these children to have successful school experiences rather than frustrating failures at six, eight, or ten years of age. Baltimore's Early School Admissions Project was set up to seek the answers.

In each of four Early School Admissions Centers, housed in schools in Baltimore's most depressed neighborhoods, about thirty-five children attend daily sessions. These boys and girls live in the asphalt and cement heart of the country's sixth largest city, in neighborhoods where crime and delinquency rates are so high that their teachers find it unwise to make home visits alone or after dark.

The children's dwelling places are low standard, regardless of whether they live in dilapidated hous-

ing in uncleared slums or in high-rise, slum-clearance apartments. Crowding is the rule, even in the new apartments.

Family incomes, often derived partly or entirely from welfare sources, are in the lowest bracket. More frequently than not, only one parent—usually the mother—lives with and is responsible for the family. Neither adults nor older children in most households have had much successful schooling.

Many of the children who live in big city slums or slum-clearance developments never have the normal experiences of childhood. Their environment is so inhibiting that they reach school age without being ready for school. Their vocabularies are so limited and their speech so poor that they are handicapped in communication. Their restricted lives have not permitted them to develop either the basic store of concepts they must have before they are ready to read or the social maturity they need in order to mingle successfully with their peers.

The typical child at one of the Centers has never been encouraged to talk at home. No one has ever visited with him, told him stories, read to him, taken him on a picnic, made something special of his birthday, or sung him a goodnight song. His mother, though she usually loves him, may have too many other children to take care of, or be too exhausted by the struggle to keep her family alive, or too discouraged and disturbed by family problems such as alcoholism or disease to take part in the normal mother-child interchanges by which the more fortunate children learn so much.

"Quit that," "Hush that noise," "Shut up" are often a large part of what a Project child has heard from his mother, and he has had few other contacts. Home is so cramped that his older brothers and sisters are seldom there except to sleep. He hasn't played with other children his own age because little children can't play outdoors in the heart of a big city without supervision, and inside play is precluded by lack of space and sometimes by apartment anti-noise regulations.

A child who is selected to attend a Center enters a world of surprises, and every surprise teaches him something. He is surprised to be encouraged to talk, allowed to run, and taught to sing. He is surprised when the teacher asks his name, and more surprised that she considers the name important enough for her to write it on a nice fresh card. For each child there is a flashcard with his name, in manuscript, and a pasted-on picture. The children learn to recognize their own cards as the teachers hold them up during roll call or while dividing a class into groups. At first, the pictures are all-important, but by the time some of the pictures have fallen off, several of the children recognize the symbols that mean their own names. A few can even help their neighbors with theirs.

Enunciation is a problem in the speech of most of the children at the Centers; Southern accents of the lazy, hard-to-understand variety prevail.

"Say it so we can all hear and understand you," says the teacher when a child mumbles a word. Then she repeats the word, with exaggerated emphasis on syllables and endings. The child tries once more. "That's good," and again the teacher sounds out the word.

Gradually, the children's speech improves. Some even act as teachers at home. One mother told a teacher of her own trouble with pronouncing the word "cereal," especially after having broken her upper plate. "You can say it, Mamma," her son told her. "Watch my mouth and then say it, ce-re-al."

"And sure enough," the mother said, "I *can* say it."

Vocabularies grow at the Centers, thanks in large part to stories and games. Four-year-olds at the Centers act out stories and show that they know not only "run," "jump," and "hide," but "gallop" and "glide" and "search."

Lunchtime is filled with novelties for newcomers. For some children, sitting at a place at table is new, so is using eating utensils instead of fingers, so is much of the food. The children are hesitant about trying unfamiliar foods at first, but after some urging by the staff members and probably more urging by empty stomachs, the youngsters are soon cleaning their plates in order to qualify for seconds. Occasionally, some will have a genuine dislike for a particular food, and then a few, like Jackie, show ingenuity. Jackie, healthy, teeth gleaming, grins as she confides, "String beans hurt my teeth terrible."

Class projects and trips introduce concepts the children will encounter in their early reading ventures. At the Centers, boys and girls who have never had a chance to see flowers grow learn about soil and how plants are nourished by it when the class grows a flower-pot garden. Never having had pets at home, they are thrilled by having a class pet—a parakeet, for instance—and during a visit to a pet store they are enchanted by kittens and puppies. One class incubated eggs in an improvised incubator. Nature cooperated and the chicks broke out of their shells during school hours. A trip to a children's zoo to arrange permanent housing for the chicks eased the heartache of parting with them when they outgrew their box in the classroom.

Because school buses are available, the Centers are able to schedule numerous excursions. Many of the children leave their home neighborhoods for the first time when they make their first class trip. The teachers never grow accustomed to how many of the things the children see on a trip—things

most people take for granted—are new to them. Homeward bound after a trip to the zoo, a boy told his teacher, "I just saw a dog in a cage." The dog was in a fenced back yard, but the little boy didn't know about back yards.

CONCEIVED and initiated in 1962 by George B. Brain, superintendent of public instruction, and jointly financed by funds from the Ford Foundation and the regular budget of the Baltimore City Public Schools, the Early School Admissions Project is an experimental, three-year program.

To determine which schools should house the Centers, the planners studied census information to identify areas of the city where most housing is low-rental, low-value, and dilapidated or otherwise deficient; where dense population goes along with a high rate of juvenile and adult delinquency; and where the family income, whether earned by unskilled or semiskilled labor or derived from welfare sources, is low.

A senior teacher, an assistant teacher, a teaching aide to take care of clerical tasks, and volunteer helpers, one for each day of the week, make up a Center's adult component. Baltimore public school teachers outstanding for their work with young children were selected as senior teachers. Assistant teachers (trained women with successful work experience at the nursery or kindergarten level) were selected from sources other than the public school system, since the Project was pledged not to deplete the regular teaching staff. Volunteer helpers were recruited from the membership of three community agencies, the Baltimore Council of Parent Cooperatives, the Baltimore Section of the National Council of Jewish Women, and the YWCA.

The entire Project staff, including volunteer personnel, participated in a series of orientation meetings which marked the beginning of a continuing program of in-service education.

All the other groundwork was simple compared to the task of finding eligible children and selecting representatives from among them to participate in the program. Using every available means, the Project attempted to identify all four-to-five-year-olds in each area served by a Center. Following this, each child's eligibility for participation was evaluated in the light of whether or not his family situation made him truly disadvantaged, whether he had any gross physical impairment (such as seriously deficient sight or hearing) that might interfere with learning, and whether his family expected to remain in the area.

Two Centers operated from February to June 1963. The following September two additional Centers opened, and the first two reopened with new groups of children.

Is the experiment a success? Everything points to a "yes" answer: All children are tested as to mental maturity when they enter and leave a Center. In June 1963, when the two original groups were retested, almost all individuals showed gains between the first and second testing, and in several cases the gains were substantial.

The two original groups have progressed to kindergarten, where they have been kept together as separate classes. Their new teachers report that the children are much too advanced to have their programs limited to the work of the regular kindergartens composed of their peers who have not had the early admission experience.

For the four groups that started in September 1963, control groups were identified—groups of the same number of children in the same neighborhood who would have qualified for admission to the Project if numbers had not been limited. The control group has now entered regular kindergartens and by the end of this school year the first real comparisons between the early admissions children and those who have not had the experience will be possible.

Although they stress that it's too soon to tell for sure, Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education Mary Adams, who is in charge of the Project, Catherine Brunner, Project coordinator, and the teachers at the Centers are excited at the apparent success of the experiment. They are encouraged by how the children have reached and even exceeded the educational goals of the Project. What the children have learned, if retained, should make for more successful school experiences.

Parents at this socioeconomic level tend to be afraid of school, sometimes, because of unhappy school experiences of their own. But as these parents get acquainted with the Center staffs during individual conferences and with the mothers of other children at informal meetings and on the class excursions they are invited to accompany, their attitude toward school changes. The school becomes a friendly partner. A mother no longer regards it as the enemy that once defeated her and that now lies in wait to defeat her child. She realizes that the school shares her concern for her child's welfare.

Even as the Project administrators and teachers enumerate the points that seem to indicate success, Mary Adams cautions, "But . . . we don't know. They're doing fine now, but what will happen when they get to the third grade? Will their achievement taper off or fall behind? Will these children have an advantage that will persist through the grades? And then what? We won't know for years."

The story of the Early School Admissions Project is as exciting as a serialized mystery story. If only the conclusion can fulfill the hopes that the first installment raises, it will be a best seller.

—ALICE CURRIE HARDING, *editorial associate*, NEA JOURNAL.